

David Simon

First of all, I would like to thank the mayor and for the invitation to address this occasion. More than that, I would like to thank our governor and state, county and city officials for undertaking to create this memorial to five men and women who gave the last measure of devotion to the public's right -- and need -- to know. I am sincerely grateful that the state of Maryland and its leadership has brought us here today.

Second, I must now admit that I am exceedingly uncomfortable thanking politicians for anything ever. Forgive me, but I was raised in newsrooms, as a journalist, and I come to you as an emissary from a time when good newspapers were not pitied or mourned by the governing powers, but rather considered with rueful wariness and even feared at moments by those in authority. We needed no memorials. Our prevailing monuments came off the presses daily to be unceremoniously dumped on doorsteps. Whether you liked it or not.

Understand what I am saying here: It is the god-given right of every American to resent or even hate his local newspaper. Indeed, it is our birthright to hate any and every news organization, print or broadcast. You might not avail yourself of that right, or you might not invoke it consistently if you do, but it is there for you whenever life doesn't go the way you want.

Your hometown newspaper will highlight your most embarrassing utterance at the PTA hearing or detail your company's bankruptcy, just as it will at some point ignore your daughter's masterful performance in the school play. It will herald some political views you abhor and denigrate some politicians you wish to cheer. It will spell your name incorrectly when you are named the Rotarian of the Year and dox you with precision when you are cuffed and processed for driving drunk.

An honest newspaper has no real friends and some fixed and certain enemies — namely those who wish to operate without the critique or attention of others. And these are the givens even in a healthy national culture, with a politically mature leadership and norms of governance that discourage the worst fascist impulses and the greatest possible violence. Today, our political culture is no longer healthy, our political leadership is no longer mature and our norms of governance are disappearing with every news cycle.

If you think for a minute that these things are occurring because mainstream journalism has become less professional, more partisan or increasingly hostile to men and women of honor, you need to read more of what once passed for newspapering in this country. The founders of the American republic were not treated to a more genteel brand of newspapering than today's political leaders — Adams, Jefferson, Madison and their ilk were all pummeled by some of the nastiest, most slanderous verbiage imaginable. But no matter. Those men were made of stronger stuff than today's politicians. Jefferson, for one, famously said he would prefer a nation with newspapers and no government to that of a country with a government and no newspapers.

Well, Jefferson's worst case scenario is now staring us down.

Capitalism and the solitary metric of maximized profit is devouring American journalism, pulling cash from the nation's newspapers to the very moment that they will close the doors. Wall Street analysts have demanded it and the hedge funds have delivered it. Here in Maryland, the Capital Gazette of this city and The Sun of Baltimore are brutalized by out-of-town-ownership that answers to the hunger of shareholders, not to any public or community obligation. The newsroom where I once labored with 500 others on morning, evening and county-zoned editions now struggles with 70 journalists on staff. Here in Annapolis, the newsroom of the paper where people gave their lives no longer exists. It's been sold out from under the now-threadbare staff.

Meanwhile, a social media construct once heralded as a great democratization of free information led by "citizen journalists" has instead proven itself to be a playground for untethered falsehood, agitprop and political machination. Without professional gatekeepers to assess and corroborate facts, anyone can say anything, and in fact, they do. We have, all of us, lived long enough to contemplate the Death of Truth.

And now, lastly, we come to the actual targeting of journalists. And do not dare write off what happened here in Annapolis to only the isolated rage of one unstable man. Credit also a political construct that has convinced too many Americans that an independent press is not only an unnecessary impediment to governance, but an affront to be eradicated. Yes, those of us gathered today are paying rightful homage to five newspaper employees martyred for simply trying to inform their community. But if you think that a great mass of other Americans are not now content to cheer the destruction of open speech or the mechanisms of dissent, if you think there is still an abiding heritage of Locke or Voltaire or John Stuart Mill in this country, then reflect on the fact that a President of these United States, the personification of leadership in what is said to be free world, preceded the carnage at the Capital Gazette by declaring that journalists who would dare to critique his policies and performance were "enemies of the people." And that any and all reportage that disadvantaged him could be classified as "fake news." An American President spent a year before the bloodshed in the Capital Gazette newsroom attacking a host of national media organizations by name — so many and so often that his ranting was tantamount to an attack on mainstream media as a whole. And by declaring the very product of so many institutions to be fraudulent and a great national danger, the president nurtured a culture of grievance in which an attempt to strike at that product or its creators could be elevated to the mantle of patriotism and heroism by extremists willing to do so. That the dispute by the gunman who took five lives here in Annapolis had been ongoing for years before the President targeted independent reporting is not suggestive of a disconnect between the recklessness of his rhetoric and the ensuing violence. Quite the opposite. The dispute in question dragged for years without accelerating into violence -- not until our national leader named a national enemy and gave thought to the unthinkable in the weakest and angriest minds of a nation saturated with firearms and devoid of responsible gun laws.

Enemies of the people.

And yet: The dead that we honor today in Annapolis are beautifully and delicately representative of what is so abiding and honorable about the simple act of going to see or learn things, coming back to a keyboard, and in a limited window of time, trying to accurately relate what is known. These dead can't be caricatured. They were not the bloated, talking heads of the cable news cycle; they were not Beltway-wrapped insiders traipsing into West Wing briefings with credentials in a dangle around their necks. The dead at the Capital Gazette were quiet and careful foot soldiers in a daily war to simply find out enough about what might be happening in Annapolis and central Maryland — be it local court decisions, police blotter items, legislative coverage, school board politics, high school and college sports, or community. Or they worked to maintain an advertising base so that the costs of delivering news to readers could be defrayed.

I had the honor of knowing three of those slain.

Rob Hiaasen, who worked for years in the features section of the Baltimore Sun, was a deft and delicate voice, crafting stories that delivered ordinary and extraordinary people both. His byline was always an invitation to travel to some part of my city and spend time encountering life on a scale that other reporters recognized as precisely human. He was a pro.

John McNamara was a friend from days shared putting out a college newspaper, the University of Maryland Diamondback. His first love stayed sports reporting and he was, among other duties, still covering UM athletics for the Capital Gazette when he was killed. In a newsroom of ranting undergraduates, he was the most humble and genuinely sincere creature and I will always remember the quiet pain on John's face when the sports editor laid out too few column inches for a basketball photo, so the choice was either editing out Buck Williams' legs in mid-jump shot or cutting four inches of Mac's game story. John killed his own copy before doing harm to the image of Williams delivering from the top of the key.

Gerald Fischman was a senior when I arrived at the Diamondback as a freshman. And he was one of three assistant editors who handed me my first story assignment and then suffered through my raw copy and made it into better.

Wendi Winters, a community beat reporter and special publication editor, and Rebecca Smith, who had just started work as a sales assistant at the newspaper, were just as randomly targeted by this insanity.

These are the people I see when I think of an American president declaring time and again for the villainy of journalists, or when I note the silence and complicity of his political allies in that kind of rhetoric. Yes, this memorial to the slain in Annapolis is an essential response to that cynicism and I am grateful for it. But my time in newsrooms leaves me with no gift for optimism. We are gathered here three years later and I am no less fearful for the future. Because more than an unfit president, or the silence of his allies, or the rank partisanship that has

devoured our governing ethics – I am worried about us. About we, the people -- the citizens of this republic. Annapolis was a harbinger, a terrible warning. But now, three years later, who are we still? What are we thinking? How do we govern a society when our media culture is collapsing, when Americans no longer entitle themselves to different opinions – which is our nature and birthright – but to different facts -- a world where truth has died? What do we think is coming when many of us cheer the idea that a free press is their biggest enemy? What do they think they win when a gunman marches into an American newsroom? Federal judgeships? Cash back on their taxes? More racial privilege? A new burst of freedom?

If we continue down this road we are not going to remain even a flawed democratic experiment for much longer. And if our journalists are dead, or cowed, or silenced by considerations of profit alone, then many of us will find that fresh American hell without a single moment of moral reckoning. Remember what happened here and why.

Thank you.